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Climate Week: solidarity and vulnerability reduction at the heart of the post-Paris agenda

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“Climate Week” opens today in New York, just after Hurricanes Harvey and Irma battered the northwest of the Caribbean and the southeast of the United States. They have once again demonstrated the destructive potential of such climate events—which is correlated with their intensity, their speed and their trajectory—in both continental and island territories, in developing and developed countries alike.

These events thus remind us that challenges linked to climate change, such as the likely intensification of cyclones—there being no consensus among the scientific community about an increase in their frequency—, affect all communities living in high-risk areas, in both the North and the South, from the tourist destinations to the poorer island states, or the countries bordering the Gulf of Mexico that have drawn some of their wealth from hydrocarbons in the subsoil. Once again, these terrible events demonstrate the global dimension of climate challenges: these disruptions have an indiscriminate impact on entire populations and communities, regardless of their levels of greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, we are all potentially victims, but we are also all responsible, since, as we know, only radical changes to our production and consumption patterns will enable us to curb this problem.

However, the fundamental lesson of the last few weeks is elsewhere: natural disasters of this kind are not inevitable. Indeed, they are not solely the result of so-called “extreme climate events”, but rather of the conjunction of these events and our land uses, which themselves generate and multiply “risks”. When events such as Harvey and Irma occur, the media, the authorities and the public at large tend to qualify them as “unprecedented” or unique, thereby implying that the resulting disasters could not have been anticipated.

However, in-depth analysis of recent disasters has revealed the part human societies play in their own vulnerability to natural hazards, and hence to the magnitude of impacts. In New Orleans, the destruction of wetlands and the construction of a dense urban system in recent decades paved the way for the dramatic consequences of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, that is the storm surge and the failure to drain rainwater and flooding from nearby lakes. In France in 2010, Storm Xynthia caused devastation in low-lying sandy areas that had been heavily urbanised since the 1950s. Similar situations arise all over the world, from the Pacific Islands to European coastal zones and the French overseas territories. This was the case of the French-Dutch island of Saint Martin, which was devastated by Irma because, among other factors, it failed to learn from Hurricane Luis in 1995. Here, the 1986 tax incentives (Pons Law) to encourage the rapid development of tourism led to a massive influx of illegal workers from the nearby islands (the population quadrupled in just eight years), resulting in sudden, uncontrolled urbanisation in the low-lying areas such as Sandy Ground in the French part of the island. Without sufficient management of urbanisation, the flows of informal migrants settled in areas that were naturally highly exposed to risks of coastal flooding; the situation was all the more serious given that housing was very makeshift. These areas were destroyed by Luis, posing serious threats to health and security and revealing the root causes of vulnerability in Saint Martin.

This example, like so many others, highlights the dramatic consequences of the territorial dynamics of the latter part of the last century (coastal urbanisation, the degradation of natural buffer ecosystems, the gradual neglect of risk, etc.): land-use planning in these territories (or the lack thereof) is, along with weather events, one of the major risk factors. The vulnerability evidenced in recent weeks is not inevitable. Rebuilding processes need to avoid making the same mistakes and lessons must be learnt as quickly as possible. This is the real challenge in the wake of such disasters, as each one is a source of information, of new understanding about the factors of vulnerability. Analysing, exploring and deciphering such disasters is the first duty towards the many victims in order to prevent the recurrence of such scenarios every year, with the public authorities powerless to act. Questions must be answered about the best way to adapt our societies and our practices, and ambitious policies need to be implemented to increase the long-term resilience of our territories. And this must be done as quickly as possible. We should not seek to adapt at all costs, stubbornly making the same mistakes, but instead find ways to increase the resilience of our territories while ensuring their capacity for ongoing adaptation over time.

In addition to being a symbolic week illustrating the commitment and mobilisation of a growing number of actors every year, **“Climate Week” also opens a longer two-year sequence, during which the guiding principle will be “ambition”, within the framework of the revision of the Paris Agreement’s commitments. Vulnerability needs to be central to this discussion, since protecting communities and their socio-economic future in the long term will be a pillar of our climate ambition.** We already know that despite all our efforts, the future will hold new and greater risks, which will need to be anticipated. Moreover, it is important to move in this direction in order to

conserve the unity, trust and balance of the Agreement reached in Paris almost two years ago, through greater mobilisation and better cooperation between all of the parties concerned, in particular the most directly affected communities. *Illustration:* www.climateweeknyc.org

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